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***Sanskrit Compounding and the Semantic Relations in the  
Structural, Philological, and Interpretive Dimensions of Samhita  
Texts: A Study of Nominal Combinations and Their Contextual  
Significance***

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***ABSTRACT***

*Sanskrit literature, particularly the Vedic and post-Vedic Samhitas, is deeply marked by the prevalence of compounds (samāsa). These linguistic formations are not merely stylistic choices but are integral to the semantic and interpretive structures of the texts. In the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda, as well as in later Samhitas, the tendency to condense meaning into highly compact forms gives rise to a wide range of interpretive challenges and opportunities. This paper explores the phenomenon of compounding in Sanskrit, the semantic relations implied by compounds in the Samhitas, and the interpretive challenges posed by their polyvalence. By analyzing categories of compounds, their semantic networks, and their contextual deployment, the paper highlights how compounding in Sanskrit reflects both linguistic creativity and ritual-philosophical precision.*

***KEYWORDS:*** *Sanskrit compounding, Samhitas, semantic relations, samāsa, Vedic philology, interpretive challenges, linguistic analysis.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of compounding (samāsa) represents one of the most striking characteristics of the Sanskrit language. Unlike many other classical languages, Sanskrit reveals a remarkable tendency to compress complex ideas, relationships, and descriptions

into tightly knit lexical units. This linguistic device not only economizes expression but also enhances the semantic depth of the text. Nowhere is this tendency more visible than in the Samhitas, the earliest and most sacred layer of Vedic literature. These collections of hymns, chants, and ritual formulas—the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda—demonstrate how compounding functions as both a grammatical necessity and a hermeneutical challenge.

The Samhitas were composed in an oral tradition, intended primarily for recitation during ritual performances. Given this context, the language had to be both succinct and mnemonically efficient. Compounds provided a linguistic strategy to encapsulate multilayered meanings in metrically precise phrases, ensuring that verses could be transmitted and remembered across generations. For example, a single compound might simultaneously denote a deity's attribute, cosmological role, and ritual function, thereby collapsing entire networks of meaning into one compact word.

At the same time, compounding in Samhitas is far from straightforward. The interpretive challenge arises because compounds are inherently polyvalent—they can be parsed in multiple ways depending on the semantic relation implied. This feature reflects the Vedic worldview itself, which did not reduce concepts to one-dimensional clarity but embraced plurality and layered meanings. For instance, a compound describing a deity could be read both as a literal epithet and as a symbolic metaphor, each reading holding equal validity within the ritual context.

The study of compounds in Samhitas is thus not confined to the technical realm of grammar but extends to broader domains of philology, ritual studies, theology, and poetics. Traditional Sanskrit grammarians, beginning with Pāṇini, provided elaborate frameworks for categorizing compounds. Yet, when these rules are applied to Vedic compounds, they often appear fluid, requiring sensitivity to historical usage, ritual background, and poetic intent. Modern scholarship has highlighted this interpretive richness, suggesting that compounding is not just a matter of linguistic economy but a deliberate cultural and philosophical choice that mirrors the complexity of Vedic thought.

This paper, therefore, seeks to explore Sanskrit compounding in the Samhitas from a semantic perspective, with special attention to the relations implied by different compound types and the challenges posed by their interpretation. By analyzing selected examples, contextual usages, and broader semantic networks, the paper aims to illuminate the central role of compounding in shaping the ritual, theological, and philosophical imagination of early Indian culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Traditional Grammarians

The ancient grammatical tradition, beginning with Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, gave a comprehensive classification of compounds into four types: *avyayībhāva* (indeclinable compounds), *tatpuruṣa* (determinative compounds), *dvandva* (copulative compounds), and *bahuvrīhi* (possessive or exocentric compounds). Later commentators such as Patañjali and Kātyāyana elaborated on these categories, linking them to both syntactic behavior and semantic import.

### Modern Scholarship

Contemporary philologists such as Whitney, Renou, and Macdonell have underscored the interpretive complexities of Vedic compounds. Modern linguistic studies often highlight that Vedic compounds resist strict classification, as they frequently overlap categories or encode multiple semantic possibilities simultaneously. Comparative Indo-European linguistics has also shown that compounding is a shared feature across ancient languages, but Sanskrit developed the system with unparalleled regularity and depth.

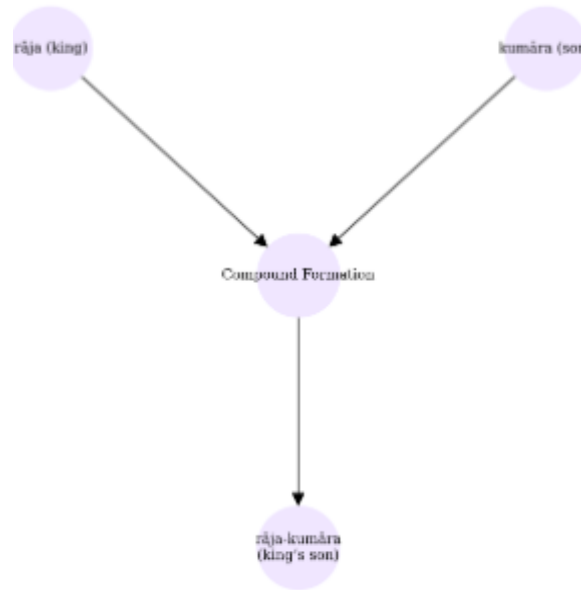
### Studies on Samhitas

Scholarly attention has particularly focused on the Rigveda, where compact expressions like *agnimīlepurohitam* demonstrate how compounds embody ritual, theological, and poetic dimensions. Research emphasizes that compounding in Samhitas cannot be treated as merely grammatical; it functions as a semantic condensation of ritual actions, divine attributes, and cosmological principles.

## NATURE OF SANSKRIT COMPOUNDING

*Table 1: Classification of Sanskrit Compounds (Samāsa)*

Compound Type	Description	Example (Devanāgarī)	Meaning in English
<b>Avyayībhāva</b>	Indecidable as first element, modifies whole	उपरिगृह (upari- gṛha)	"Above the house"
<b>Tatpuruṣa</b>	Determinative (modifier-modified relation)	राजकुमार (rāja- kumāra)	"King's son"
<b>Dvandva</b>	Copulative (coordinated entities)	मित्रावरुण (mitra- varuṇa)	"Mitra and Varuṇa"
<b>Bahuvrīhi</b>	Possessive, exocentric	पीताम्बर (pītāmbara)	"One who has yellow garments"



*Figure 1: Structure of a Sanskrit Compound*

### Grammatical Framework

The classification of compounds in Pāṇini's system is widely used as the basis for analysis. Tatpuruṣa compounds, for example, express a modifier-modified relation (e.g., rājakumāra,

"king's son"), while bahuvrīhi compounds express external possession (e.g., pītāmbaraḥ, "one who has yellow garments"). In Samhitas, however, these rules often appear fluid.

### Compactness and Economy

The *Samhitas* aim for compactness due to their oral-ritual context. Compounds reduce the number of syllables, thereby fitting metrical and phonetic requirements. This linguistic economy enhances the efficiency of recitation while simultaneously expanding the interpretive horizon.

### Polysemy

A striking feature of *Samhita* compounds is polysemy. A single compound may admit multiple readings, often intentional. This semantic layering is not accidental but reflects the Vedic tendency to create polyvalent expressions that resonate with ritual, cosmic, and philosophical significances.

## SEMANTIC RELATIONS IN SAMHITA COMPOUNDS

*Table 2: Semantic Relations in Samhita Compounds*

Semantic Relation	Example (Compound)	Possible Meanings	Contextual Significance
Possession	इन्द्रशत्रु (indraśatru)	(a) Enemy of Indra; (b) One whose enemy is Indra	Theological ambiguity
Agency	अग्निपुरोहित (agni-purohita)	"Agni as household priest"	Ritual mediator role
Coordination	मित्रावरुण (mitra-varuṇa)	"Mitra and Varuṇa"	Dual deity worship
Quality/Attribute	श्वेताश्व (śvetāśva)	"One whose horses are white"	Divine epithet

### Determinative Relations

Tatpuruṣa compounds in the *Samhitas* encode relations such as possession, agency, instrumentality, or location. For instance, agnipurohita may signify "Agni who is the

household priest” or “the priest positioned in front with Agni.” The semantic relation is determined by context, ritual significance, and exegetical tradition.

### Copulative Relations

Dvandva compounds express a copulative or coordinate relation, where multiple entities are invoked together. In hymns, such compounds often conjoin deities, such as Mitrāvaruṇā (Mitra and Varuṇa), thereby reflecting the theological principle of divine cooperation.

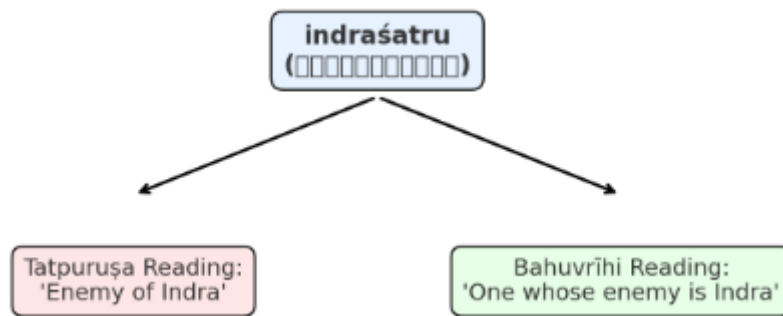
### Exocentric Relations

Bahuvrīhi compounds frequently appear in descriptive epithets for gods or ritual participants. For example, śvetāśvaḥ (he whose horses are white) functions not as a description of “white horses” but as an epithet for the owner of such horses, often a deity.

### Semantic Layering

The interpretive difficulty arises when a compound admits both internal and external readings. A term may be simultaneously read as *tatpuruṣa* and bahuvrīhi, thereby opening multiple pathways of interpretation. This semantic layering reflects the Vedic worldview, in which language is not fixed but polyvalent and symbolic.

## CHALLENGES IN INTERPRETING COMPOUNDS IN SAMHITAS



*Figure 2: Semantic Polysemy in Indraśatru Compound*

### Ambiguity

One of the greatest challenges is ambiguity. A compound may yield two or more equally plausible readings, making translation difficult. For instance, indraśatru could mean “enemy of Indra” or “one whose enemy is Indra.” Both readings occur in traditional exegesis.

**Context Dependence**

The meaning of a compound often depends on the ritual or poetic context. Without awareness of the sacrificial background, the interpreter may miss the intended relation.

**Loss of Transparency**

Some compounds in the Samhitas have become opaque over time, as the etymological relation between the components is no longer apparent to later readers.

**Multiplicity of Traditions**

The Samhitas were interpreted by different schools (śākhās) with divergent hermeneutical principles. Each tradition often imposed its own reading on ambiguous compounds, leading to a multiplicity of interpretations.

**SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY****Philological Insights**

A close analysis of compounds enriches our philological understanding of Samhitas. It allows us to reconstruct the linguistic habits of early Vedic poets and ritual specialists.

**Ritual and Theological Interpretation**

Compounds encode ritual instructions and theological insights. Recognizing the semantic relation within a compound is often essential to understanding the ritual function of a hymn or mantra.

**Comparative Linguistics**

Sanskrit compounds, particularly in the *Samhitas*, provide valuable material for comparative Indo-European linguistics, shedding light on the development of compounding strategies in related languages.

**Philosophical Dimensions**

Beyond ritual, compounds reveal metaphysical principles. The merging of words symbolizes the merging of cosmic forces, reflecting the Vedic view of language as a mirror of reality.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

### **Philological Method**

A philological approach examines compounds within their textual and ritual contexts, supported by the commentary tradition.

### **Semantic Analysis**

Semantic analysis classifies compounds not only grammatically but also according to their contextual meaning.

### **Comparative Approach**

A comparative approach situates Sanskrit compounding within the broader Indo-European framework, highlighting both universal features and unique developments.

## **CASE STUDIES FROM SAMHITA TEXTS**

### **Rigveda Hymns**

The opening verse *agnimīlepurohitam* demonstrates how compounding integrates ritual and theological meaning. *Purohita* (“placed in front”) functions simultaneously as a ritual designation and as a cosmic metaphor for Agni’s role as mediator between gods and men.

### **Atharvaveda Compounds**

In the Atharvaveda, compounds often serve apotropaic purposes. Terms like *viṣānnaśatru* (“one whose enemy is poisoned”) reflect both ritualistic efficacy and semantic condensation.

### **Yajurveda and Sāmaveda**

These texts, focused on ritual formulas and chants, employ compounds for brevity. Terms like *yajñapurūṣa* (“the man of sacrifice”) encapsulate entire theological constructs in a single expression.

## **INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES**

### **Traditional Commentaries**

Sāyaṇa and other commentators often resolve ambiguities by situating compounds within the ritual framework.

**Modern Translations**

Modern translators frequently opt for footnotes to present multiple readings, recognizing that a single translation often fails to capture the full semantic range.

**Hermeneutic Balance**

An interpretive balance requires sensitivity to both grammatical categories and ritual-theological context.

**CONCLUSION**

Compounding in Sanskrit, particularly in the *Samhitas*, is not a mechanical process but a creative and semantic phenomenon. The compounds condense ritual, theological, and poetic meanings, making them central to the interpretive enterprise of Vedic studies. Their ambiguity is not a weakness but a feature, reflecting the Vedic worldview where language itself is polyvalent and sacred. Understanding compounding in the *Samhitas* thus opens a window into the linguistic, ritual, and philosophical imagination of early Indian culture.

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